POLICY BRIEF

Assessment on Our Own Terms

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF ART AND DESIGN

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Assessment on Our Own Terms

> *"Idealism increases in direct proportion to one's distance from the problem."*
>
> — John Galsworthy

> *"I often find that theories are like exquisitely beautiful machines that explode the moment they are switched on. The virus of life immediately infects the system and proves far too polymorphous to be contained in its structure."*
>
> — Michael FitzGerald

> *"He uses statistics the way a drunken man uses lamp posts—for support rather than illumination."*
>
> — Andrew Lang

> *"When a single boy too often cries "wolf" in the absence of wolves, we disregard his speech. When it becomes the habit of many to cry "wolf" in the absence of wolves, our system of speaking itself is undermined."*
>
> — Nicholas Wolterstorff

> *"Change the water, keep the baby."*
>
> — Nancy Smith Fichter

Introduction

This policy brief is shaped by a basic premise. As highly educated and experienced visual arts and design professionals, we know how to make effective evaluations and assessments. Improvement is always possible, but the fact that we can improve does not mean that we do not know what we are doing. All art and design professionals work their whole lives to improve their powers of self-assessment. In fact, if expert judgment were still trusted in our society and among policy-makers associated with higher education, there would be no need for this paper. Our problem is not that we do not know how to make assessments and evaluations, but rather that we are not as adept as we need to be in explaining to others what we do, how it works, and why it works. We also need to improve our abilities to debate effectively when our explanations are rejected.

As is true in all professions, we take a lot of our knowledge about what we do for granted. What we do makes sense to us—it has art- or design-based or visual logic—but it is hard to convey this to others because we have to translate it from these logics into speech logic. And so, when we try to inform others of what we do and why we do it, we often face a lack of comprehension that we cannot surmount. Articulating what we do is difficult, both for ourselves and for listeners who are not art or design professionals. This paper is in part an effort to help us better communicate what it is that we do. In order to address this situation we have divided this policy brief into five sections.

Note: The Achievement and Quality Web site referenced throughout this paper may be found at https://www.arts-accredit.org/council-of-arts-accrediting-associations/achievement-quality/.

We begin with describing some of the artistic principles surrounding our disciplines as well as the approaches and philosophies we use to evaluate our work. We will relate our principles and practices to the progress of our disciplines. We will then use these ideas as a basis for developing ways of communicating what we know with individuals and groups outside our field, including how we might debate with intellectual and procedural opponents when necessary.

The purpose of this policy brief is to help us all think about ways to address the communication problem that we and all fields of expertise have at the present time. We do not present our points as final answers, nor do we suggest that our wordings, descriptions and arguments will work in every situation, nor that these are the only descriptions and arguments that are necessary. Again, our purpose is to help us all think more deeply about communication, with the goal of maintaining assessment on terms useful and productive for the art and design profession. This is becoming increasingly problematic in these difficult times for all of American higher education. Therefore, maintaining assessment on our terms requires an increased focus and effort by all those with an interest in the future of our profession.

Principles of artistic evaluation.

"Art is not a thing, it is a way."
— Elbert Hubbard

Let us consider several principles that are critical to artistic evaluations in art and design. In presenting the particular principles we have chosen, we are also going to touch on the nature of artistic evaluation. But first we need to make a point that applies to the entire topic being addressed. We are talking about the assessment of artistic work. Fundamentally, artistic work involves making choices and combining those choices in the creation or presentation of a work of art or design. To some degree, works of art or design are developed for a particular place, purpose, or time. Visual artists are not the only people who work this way. Teachers, diplomats, investors, politicians, and many others also work this way. And, at the highest levels of achievement in almost every field, this artistic mode of thinking and working is present. It applies to advanced theoretical work in the sciences and to the most creative and communicative kinds of scholarship. There are certainly particular elements of the sciences and humanistic scholarship that do not and cannot work this way if they are to be effective in particular fields. So when we are talking about artistry or artistic evaluation, we are not just talking about the creation of a work in a field of art or design, but also teaching, scholarship, therapy, and other art and design specializations practiced at the highest level.

Parts/Wholes/Goals

Let us begin with a set of principles displaying connections between parts, wholes, and goals. In evaluation, it is necessary to consider complete wholes that may contain many parts or elements. These parts may be evaluated separately, but the most critical thing is how the parts work together to produce a composite result. While it is important to have fully functioning parts, this does not mean that functioning parts will automatically create a functioning whole, much less an outstanding result.

Here is another principle: the composite result is judged in terms of its intent. And this intent is determined by the creator of the work. Intent can be expressed quite simply with regard to studio art: "I shall draw a portrait," or in design: "I shall create a unified product and

advertising campaign." However, in specific terms, the artist or designer may approach a particular work in any one of many successful ways. The visual artist has an infinite number of possibilities, and makes particular choices among them. To some extent, teachers, scholars, and other art and design professionals have the same kinds of choices.

The nature of successful evaluation in artistic matters depends on understanding the relationships between the goals, conceptualizations, processes, and products of the creator in great depth, and then being able to evaluate the creator's success at developing connections between the goal, processes, and eventual product. Since there is a virtually infinite number of goals, many of which may evolve as one creates, and since decisions about them are made by individuals, effective assessment requires deep knowledge and sophistication. It is for all these reasons, and for other reasons we have yet to describe, that the arts rely primarily on individual evaluation rather than standardized assessment.

Technique

We all know that technique—competence in the basic languages and means of art or design—is essential, but also that it is not everything. Perspective on vocabularies of skills and knowledge constituting technique changes from the first studio class to the last work. At some point, technical proficiencies of various kinds need to rise so that they may reach total fluency or transcendence in terms of the type of work being created. It's not like acquiring knowledge, which is done once, especially if one has a good memory. A transcendent technique must be maintained by constant practice. There is no such thing as obtaining technique and then forgetting about it.

As we all know, in the creation of a work of art or design, technique is the fundamental ability to work proficiently with various art and design mediums. There are many mediums and approaches, and thus many kinds of technique. Assessment of technique varies greatly in approach and depth when we consider the gamut of skill levels, from beginner to virtuoso. As artists and designers grow in sophistication, technique becomes more complex. Methods of intellectual pursuit, including analysis and interpretation are combined with the various techniques, artistic mediums, and methods of production, blended with them, integrated and synthesized at ever increasing levels of sophistication. Methods and techniques combine and integrate to become units, patterns, and entireties so that one acquires the ability easily to combine techniques, concepts, and process in a virtually infinite number of variations of art and design work. Often, those techniques become building blocks of still larger patterns, so that an artistic structure and an aesthetic architecture emerge. Physical and intellectual skills gradually work in larger and larger conceptual and creative units. This reflects the same set of principles surrounding parts and wholes. The goal of the beginning student may be primarily to work with a simple concept or to work at a basic level with one medium or material. Here success at basic knowledge and skill acquisition can be judged in a somewhat standardized way by knowledgeable professionals. But all this is just the basis for progress toward making sophisticated work in various art and design mediums. Every step of that progress involves individual decision-making.

Our evaluation of that progress is necessarily complex. Some elements of our evaluation will have rather universal yes or no answers, while other elements will not. Art and design professionalism—a professional standard—requires mastery of all these elements—those few that are easily quantifiable as well as the many that are not. Artistic professionalism encompasses technical mastery as well as aesthetic decisions. All artists and designers know that mere technical fluency is not sufficient for true quality.

Structural Frameworks and Systems

Art and design not only have techniques, they have conceptual and structural frameworks. Frameworks are inherent in various art and design media. But there are other frameworks as well. Frameworks are established in part by the size and scope of particular works, a single painting or drawing in comparison to a large-scale advertising project, for example. A framework may also be a method of discovery as designed for a single project or artwork, or a limitation, sets of parameters, or the conceptual focus of a work of art or design. The frameworks we have or in many cases the methods we have for creating frameworks are common, but applications of them are not. These frameworks are discernable to those with sufficient knowledge. They structure basic forms of artistic communication and art- or design-based discovery. But the framework itself is not the entire goal, nor does the framework produce a standardized result. It is not a die that stamps out identical pieces of machinery, a scientific law, or a chemical formula. A framework may call naturally for certain techniques, but it does not require that they be used in a specific way.

From time to time, various aspects of art or design practice, or individual artists or designers develop systems of aesthetic thought and organization. These, along with genres and styles, develop over time, change, and evolve. Eventually new approaches are developed. Systems can be integrated with frameworks and techniques. While they are goal driven, systems are developed in order to create a work or a series of works. Neither the framework nor the system is the work itself.

In other words, in the application of frameworks and systems, we are seeking differences, rather than sameness. We are not looking for imitation, but rather new and fresh insights, different revelations, the uniquely powerful application. Consistent with the theme we have already sounded, successful, effective evaluation in art and design depends on a sophisticated understanding of the integration of frameworks and systems and their integration with technical means, all to produce a specific whole; a work of art or design or act of teaching, or scholarship, or therapy, and so forth.

The Artistic Mode of Thought

Consider now how the art or design mode of thought functions differently than other modes of thought. Art and design as well as the other arts are about discovery, but discovery in the arts takes place in a different way than the sciences, the social sciences, or history and the other humanities. To simplify as much as possible, the artistic mode of thought and work discovers things by individuals creating with them. Cézanne discovered a great deal about landscapes by creating landscapes. Shakespeare discovered things about tragedy by creating magnificently with the elements of tragedy. This is why the arts work with things and make discoveries that are not revealed in other kinds of analysis often until centuries later.

The arts express. Express what? Emotions, of course — states of mind and of being, in addition to relationships among characters or states of mind. Consider the various artistic approaches of Picasso in the exploration of a single theme or concept. A single concept or approach can have many different guises. The arts are by nature ambiguous. Their analysis and evaluation are complex, even elusive.

Science, on one hand, discovers by locating the laws, principles, and formulas that have always existed, and expresses them most usually in mathematical terms. Science is finding out how things work. Art is creating new things from what is already available. Each approach is a mode for discovery. Science is looking for the universal answer while art is always crafting a particular answer—often within the context of a framework, such as in a landscape or in tragedy, for example.

For this reason, scientific kinds of evaluations can never do the entire job of evaluating in the arts disciplines. Science is looking for single answers; the arts, for multiple answers conceived by individual creators as they set their particular goals for specific works or performances.

All these points show clearly why a total reliance on quantifiable data, sometimes mischaracterized as "assessment," is not consistent with the nature of evaluation in the arts. This is why we are extremely reticent about so-called "best practices," which suggest that one way of doing something is better than all the others. For us, "best practices" cover a range rather than focusing on a specific formula or approach.

Principles Summary

Let's summarize and extend what we have said so far. The arts are centered in a culture of achievement in an evaluation of whole works rather than a culture of evidence with regard to easily assessable parts. Successful works are those that achieve goals they have set for themselves at the beginning or in the course of development, rather than following strictly a set of universal principles or rules. A goal is often based on certain conceptualizations or processes that are created or selected by the creator of the work, and these are combined with techniques and mediums to create the end product, a work of art or design. Given our understanding of the goal and intent of the creator, we assess against the "best" things that we know given the depth of understanding we have about the goal. When we assess, we are interested in artistry or applications of the artistic mode of thought, or the development of knowledge, skills, experiences, habits of mind, and so forth that lead to highly sophisticated achievements.

When considering our students and how we evaluate them, we know that we are dealing with a group of individuals who usually come to us after several years of working out their aspirations to be as good as they can possibly be. Our students bring a lot to the table before we accept them into our programs. That is why we accept them as students. Therefore, in the vast majority of cases our evaluation challenge is far greater than if we were dealing with the elementary techniques of beginners. Many of the complexities that we are speaking about are already in play when our most advanced students come to us. It is for this reason and many others that evaluations based on standardization are not appropriate. This will be discussed later on in greater depth.

How do we apply these principles in the various forms of evaluation that we use?

*"A writer is somebody for whom writing is
harder than it is for other people."*
— Thomas Mann

Let us look briefly at a number of the evaluation mechanisms we use in visual art and design. We hope you would agree that the principles and nature of evaluation we have just described are derived from the nature of the arts themselves and specifically from visual art and design. We have already talked about setting goals for achievement as the basis for artistic endeavor. It is clear to anyone looking carefully at our field that we set educational achievement goals at all levels of endeavor.

Standards and Goals

We have Standards statements, and these are published and readily available. They are frameworks, not blueprints, at least at the national level. The NASAD Standards represent a general consensus about what is necessary. These necessities are expressed in terms of overall goals. As we move from NASAD Standards at the national level toward the more local levels, goal-setting becomes more precise. At the institutional level, decisions about goals become more specifically defined and directed toward the aspirations of a unit's mission, goals and objectives. Institutions determine how they will achieve general expectations of the field and their own particular expectations in the various areas they teach.

At the individual level, goal-setting is even more detailed. The individual makes specific decisions associated with creation of a particular work in whatever specialization of art or design they practice. The more complex the goals to be expressed in art- or design-based logic become, the harder it is to write them down in words with clarity and specificity. But the basic truth is that the art and design field does have goals at all levels that are expressed in standards. And, whether or not specific goals can be expressed easily or at all in speech logic is not the determining factor in whether or not goals exist. There is no reason for the art and design fields to agree with critics who charge that there are no specific goals for achievement.

Individual Work

Standards or expectations can be expressed in many dimensions; for example, levels of technique, degrees of breadth and depth, types of knowledge application, and so forth. But beyond specific standards, we also have working formulations of ideas about the attributes of successful work. For example, below is a list of attributes and characteristics of individual achievement that appear on our Achievement and Quality Website:

Characteristics and Attributes of Individual Achievement

- Basic professional-level knowledge and skills

- Personal vision evident in work

- Conceptual acuity and creative virtuosity at multiple levels of complexity

- Imagination and ability to channel imagination to reach artistic goals

- Technical virtuosity

- Conceptual and technical command of integration and synthesis

Now we would suggest that to some extent meeting the Standards set by NASAD and by individual institutions enables development of work with these attributes by practicing professionals. However, the attributes are not manifested in the same way. Their actual realization is subject to preferences or individual aspirations and standards of quality that are internal to the kind of work being done and to the development of each artist or even each work of art or design.

Institutional Work

When we move beyond individuals to institutions, we have also developed sets of general Standards that lay a foundation for the specific work of those institutions. But in addition to these, we are also able to identify important elements and conditions that are present when institutions

are successful. These are attributes observable in most successful art and/or design teaching institutions. While the actual text we have on this topic in our Achievement and Quality Web site is too long to be presented in full, below is an outline of the major points:

Important Elements and Conditions of Institutional Quality

- Meet NASAD Standards and beyond

- Purposes carefully crafted and regularly fulfilled

- Clear focus and sustained effort

- Realistic analyses and thoughtful decision-making connected to the pursuit of excellence in the art form

- High levels continuously pursued and raised over time in terms of personnel, teaching and learning, and areas of work defined by purposes

- Supportive, challenging environment

These attributes are achieved by different institutions in different ways, and certainly they are applied to different purposes in different ways.

Consistent with the way the arts work, we not only have general and individual goals expressed as Standards, attributes, and conditions, but we also have both technical and artistic means of evaluating how well we are achieving these goals. At the individual level a tremendous amount of educational time and energy is spent developing and honing skills of self-evaluation to the highest possible level. This is absolutely critical in the creation of a work of art or design where evaluation is constant throughout the entire creative process, and especially in the final product itself. In fact, virtuosity in constant adjustment is a significant goal.

External Evaluation

Beyond internal self-evaluation abilities, we also have means to accomplish external evaluations. These means are more varied, involve more people, are more public, and more frequent than in many other disciplines, especially in the course of formal education. Our institutions use a combination of means. Let us look at the set of means we use from two different perspectives. First, let us just list them, or at least the most common ones. To use some assessment terminology, we accomplish both formative and summative evaluations within and across this set of means. These are methods we already have.

We have juried exhibitions. Individuals display their work for and are graded by teachers other than their own. We have all sorts of competitions. Some are public, but many are internal, held within a single institution for placement of work in a student exhibition. Much employment is obtained through portfolio review. Public exhibitions at professional galleries followed by public and peer criticism are the norm. We have the constant assessment of the studio class and individual study with art or design faculty. And of course we have the relentless criticism of other artists and designers, and the ability to compare our achievement with that of others. In addition to all of these arts-centered approaches in evaluation, we have mechanisms that are more common to all fields, such as examinations on coursework, assessments and evaluations of projects, journalistic criticism, achievement and aptitude tests, and so forth.

We now would like to present a number of typical student achievement goals and provide the kind of indicators or evidence that we have available to evaluate these goals. These come from an April 1990 briefing paper of the Council of Arts Accrediting Associations of which NASAD is a member:

Student Achievement Goals – Indicators/ Evidence Analysis

Competence in basic arts techniques
- Entrance, continuation and graduation requirements
- Achievement tests
- Course evaluations
- Class or laboratory examinations

Basic understanding of the history of the art form in Western and other civilizations
- Course requirements
- Syllabus content
- Class examinations

Basic general education at the college level, including the ability to understand distinctions and commonalities regarding work in artistic, scientific, and humanistic domains
- Transcript analysis
- Curricular requirements
- Syllabus review
- Achievement tests
- Class and laboratory examinations

Entry-level competence in the major field of study
- Juried examinations
- Placement records

Ability to enter graduate study in the major field
- Graduate school acceptances
- Records of completion of graduate work

A coherent set of artistic/intellectual goals evident in each student's work and the ability to achieve these goals as an independent professional
- Assessment of student projects
- Content of final projects
- Faculty and peer assessment of final projects

Ability to form and defend defined judgments
- Project assessments
- Master class evaluations

Ability to communicate in spoken and written language
- Syllabus review
- Project assessments

Ability to communicate ideas in a specific art form in professional circumstances
- Internship reports
- Employee ratings of performance
- Employment records

As we discuss this topic, it becomes clear that we not only have principles and goals, we also have means. We believe that we can say honestly that over the last several decades our goals and our means have worked together to improve the quality of professional activity in all specializations of the visual arts because our goals and means are consistent with principles derived from the natures of art and design. Certainly, these goals and means have resulted in an unprecedented spread of high levels of expertise in art and design in every corner of our nation. This is not a reason to stop working on goals or means, and of course, being artists and designers, we don't stop. We always believe that we can do better. But let us look at all that we have been talking about thus far from another perspective.

Results

What do all these goals and means accomplish? What do they tell us about individual achievement? Probably we would all agree that these mechanisms tell us different things depending on the nature of the evaluation, but also on the content and level being addressed. For example, some evaluations determine whether there has been a specific knowledge and skill development. These factual or technical elements are important foundations for all students. But these evaluations also tell us the extent to which an individual can assimilate or integrate knowledge; in other words, bring various parts together to create a new whole. It is not just whether the person can create a specific type of artwork, but whether there is a meaningful interpretation that relies on but does not come entirely from technical skill with a concept, medium, or material. There are all sorts of different ways to talk about this, and none of them are adequate to express exactly what happens. But at the higher levels of achievement, our assessments get further and further away from sets of discrete bits of knowledge or discrete technical skills and move to questions of blending of aesthetic choice, of color, or texture, and so forth. The thing that makes all of this extremely difficult for those on the outside to understand is that there is almost never a pure correlation between discrete knowledge and technical skills on one hand and artistry on the other. The proof of this is that there are far more visual artists with high levels of proficiency than visual artists whose abilities are acknowledged to be supreme by most professionals in the field and by audiences in the thousands. We cannot claim scientific cause and effect relationships. And so, our evaluations move from what is easy to measure to what is difficult to measure, and ultimately to matters of personal aesthetic preference.

In summary, our field clearly has highly developed evaluation systems which function at all sorts of levels. These have been developed to be consistent with the nature of the field and its specializations. Critics may not understand what we do, or see validity in it because it is not consistent with science, social science, or humanities based views of how knowledge and skills are organized and taught, or how they are evaluated. But no one can say that we in art and design do not have systems and approaches that work in terms of who we are, what we do, and the natures of our fields. For anyone truly interested in "outcomes," our outcomes prove the validity of our approaches to evaluation.

Why these principles and the ways we apply them are essential for the progress of the discipline.

"I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it."
— Dwight L. Moody

Our third section discusses five reasons why our fundamental evaluation principles and the ways we apply them are essential for the future progress of our discipline. But let us begin with a few thoughts about change. The first issue is not whether we should change, but whether any particular change proposed will make improvements. This question is appropriate at every level, from the national, to the institutional, to the individual. If we are truly wise, we will not answer questions about improvement superficially, but will go beyond what sounds good and ask ourselves what can go wrong. How can a particular change, or line of thought about a change, turn on us or be destructive in some way in the future? What are the risks; do the benefits of greater success or a breakthrough outweigh those risks? Remember, change for change's sake is often foolish and wasteful.

We have to confront these questions directly because, in much policy-making about evaluation, we and the practitioners of other disciplines are being told that evaluation methods derived from the natures of our disciplines are self-serving and unacceptable. We are told that we have to become more generic in our evaluations. Instead of assessment systems serving learning and creating in our discipline, learning and creating in our discipline are to serve assessment. There are calls to move from frameworks to blueprints at every level. There are assumptions that anything that works, works as a technology and therefore can be made to spew out numbers that provide "transparent" information about what is happening. Increasingly, we must confront the notion promoted by our opponents that the artistic way of working—the production of unique answers for unique situations—is just wrong, in part because such answers cannot be easily compared.

What will happen if we either volunteer or are forced to succumb to these ideas and thus abandon the principles we have described and the ways we apply them? Here are five probable results based on observations of what has already been happening, and what potentially will be the long-term results:

First, we will be placed in an evaluation environment that is alien to the pursuit of our particular goals, an environment that attacks any attempt to solidify the validity of our goals.

Second, our precious time will be requisitioned for purposes not consistent with the nature of our work. Because time is a finite resource, our ability to be productive in our fields is lessened.

Third, the illusion has already been created and will be furthered that assessment requires no expertise in the thing being assessed, but only expertise in assessment. A way-station to this goal is the splintering of wholes into parts and then focusing on the parts that are easy to evaluate in a technical way and magnifying them to obscure or deny the existence of the whole.

Fourth, these three results will lead to a loss of control in curriculum, teaching, individual approaches, and evaluation. Control passes from the field to external, usually centralized bodies that make judgments on the basis of images created by numbers, rather than real achievement in the discipline.

Finally, an abandonment of our principles and ways of working will reduce our productivity as our time and energy are spent either fighting for the working room we need to be productive, or answering assessment requirements that are not based on the nature of what we do.

> *"An [uninformed] idealist is one who, in*
> *noticing that a rose smells better than a cabbage*
> *concludes that it will also make better soup."*
> — H.L. Mencken

How do we explain our principles, achievements, and methods to others?

> *"In politics, the loser is the one who lets himself*
> *be swayed by the other's arguments and who*
> *judges his own actions through his*
> *adversary's eyes."*
> — Karel Kosili

We have tried to provide, thus far, an in-depth description of how we in the visual arts think about evaluation in our fields and how we accomplish it, as well as what could happen if our methods are not better understood. The next question to address is how can we formulate these ideas to explain them in situations where there is no in-depth understanding of the art and design professions and their ways of working, especially at the highest artistic and intellectual levels? In other words, we are aware of the things that we already know and do. How can we package these things in convincing ways for those who don't know what we know and can't do what we do? We believe that the ideas presented and others like them can be explained, but we do not believe that there is a single formula, approach, package, or slogan that will do the job in every instance.

We believe that creating explanations is an artistic project rather than a technical one. As an artistic project, it has technical elements, but different techniques need to be applied for different circumstances and situations. We have laid out the elements of a framework that might be the basis for developing individual responses. NASAD has a number of resources and is building additional ones as we speak. But these frameworks can only be useful if the concepts in them are taken and applied in specific situations. This means making choices about what must be done to be effective in a particular place and time.

Before we take this issue further, let's look at one overriding principle. You cannot explain or debate effectively unless you yourself are convinced that what you are doing and the way you are doing it is fundamentally better than any other approach. This does not mean taking a rigid position or being inflexible about any changes at all. Normally, that is not only unwise, it is impossible. Our point is on a higher conceptual level. For example, you cannot argue effectively for democracy if fundamentally you believe that totalitarianism offers better alternatives. You cannot explain or argue effectively for the combination of individual evaluation and mentoring that we use to develop artistic abilities if you really believe that standardized testing is better. An arts-centered position does not mean refusing to accept any common testing at all, but rather accepting it as appropriate as part of your overall evaluation framework.

Audience and Orientation

When we are considering how to package a particular explanation, we need to ask first who all the recipients of the package will be. We also need to know, insofar as possible, what their basic orientation is. For example, do they believe that standardized testing is a superior alternative to anything else? If so, the only explanation that they are likely to accept is "we have looked at what we are doing, decided that it is completely wrong, and we are moving to a total regime of standardized testing." Obviously, this is an answer we cannot give. Here is another thing we need to think about. To what extent do the philosophical positions, livelihoods, job performance evaluations, and so forth of the individuals we are addressing demand that they prove us wrong or inadequate no matter what we say? Or, to be more positive, are we addressing individuals who want to learn about what we do and understand it in relationship to overall evaluation needs in some larger context, such as an entire institution?

What is Necessary?

A second set of questions: What do they want? What can they require? What will satisfy them? What will cause them to leave you alone? Do you need to explain anything, or rather do you just spend a bit of time translating something you already know and do into terms that they understand or will accept? To what extent does the thing that will satisfy produce marginal costs in time or protect the concept of expert evaluation as the primary assessment mechanism?

Values and Complexity

Another critically important question is what values will be used to interpret the information provided? This may be the place, and perhaps the only place where explanation is appropriate. We must also consider the pros and cons of giving complex explanations. In some cases, presenting the complexity of what we do will cause a realization that others are not qualified to evaluate what we do. In these cases, it does not matter whether we are perfectly clear or not. The goal is to show that if you don't know the field, you cannot really play in it.

There is an analogy that may work here. If you want to use a computer, you have to work with that computer according to the nature of the programs it contains. In other words, you have to work with the computer on its terms and not yours. In a way, different fields of study and practice are analogous to the computer in the sense that they have their own systems. They have their own mechanisms, their own pathways, their own structures of information. If you want to work with any given field in any kind of sophisticated way and actually help it improve, you have to learn a tremendous amount about that field. It is impossible to make suggestions about improvements to the internal workings of a computer system unless you know in great detail how such systems work and what various options are for certain kinds of decisions.

When relating these factors to developing a particular package of explanations for a particular circumstance, you need to decide the level of complexity you want to unveil. Be careful about producing complex lists of things that you do, or the criteria you use, especially when you think the response might be, "OK, that's fine, but you need to put numbers on these things," or "You need to tell us empirically how you know whether someone is achieving or not. Your opinion as a professional is not good enough."

Ideas and Tools

Let us turn now to some specific ideas and tools we have to explain our evaluation procedures. We already have many formulations. We have statements of goals and expectations everywhere, from NASAD Standards at the national level, to course descriptions at our own institutions. Many units have taken the competencies they require, correlated them with where the competencies are developed in various courses, and described how these competencies are evaluated. In other words, it is not necessary to start over, or to offer a system of evaluation on terms that are not consistent with the needs of our profession. We want to point out that competencies expected in undergraduate art and design specializations have now been gathered together by specialization and published under the [Achievement and Quality Resources](#) section of the Arts-Accredit Web site. This resource shows nationally what is expected specifically by degree by listing together; for example, all the competencies for the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Illustration, which includes the competencies for all Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees as well as those specific to only the B.F.A. in Illustration.

Explanation Preparation

Beyond what you have already done, you should formulate responses regarding issues or questions such as the following:

- What are the aspects or elements of student work that can be discussed in terms of the results of instruction usually provided in courses, studio classes, curricula, and so forth; for example, perceptual, conceptual, and technical development, problem solving, knowledge, skills, ways of working and thinking?

- What aspects or elements can you identify that cannot be discussed easily in terms of their direct correlation with various forms of instruction usually present in schools or departments of art/design? Here is an analogy that may be useful: passing the bar exam with a high score does not guarantee that a person is an outstanding trial lawyer. With respect to being a trial lawyer, the bar exam is a condition of eligibility, not an assessment of competency or potential.

- For areas where you believe valid connections between instruction and student work can be drawn, what elements and conditions of instructions contribute most directly to the level of student achievement?

- Continuing to separate areas of certainty from areas that are more speculative, how do we determine that the elements and conditions of instruction that contribute most directly to the level of student achievement are present and working well for an individual student and for a majority of students within a class, department, or school as a whole?

- What are the areas or levels about which most professionals in the field are likely to agree on the relative quality or value of the work?

- Where is there likely to be disagreement about the relative quality and value of work?

Having identified what can be known for sure, and what cannot, and/or the areas or levels where there is likely to be evaluation consensus and where there is not, you are then in the position to explain what you do on the basis of what can be done with honesty and integrity. You have also established the basis for defeating false correlations that outcomes ideologists are prone to seek. Below is an outline that an art/design school or department might fill in to provide an overall explanation of its evaluation approaches:

Outline Example

How We Evaluate and Why It Is Effective

The   School/Department/Academy/Institute of Art/Design
- How art/design works – the artistic mode of thought
- How our field defines achievement in the art/design disciplines we teach
- How we set goals for achievement
- How we evaluate student achievement
- How we evaluate faculty achievement
- How we evaluate our department/school
- How we consider external perceptions
- The competencies expected of the students we accept
- The competencies expected of students we graduate
- Why our evaluation concepts work and support our purposes

This is one of many possible packages, and perhaps not the best one for your situation. Resources for filling in the outline are on the Achievement and Quality Website.

How do we debate when necessary?

> *"The real danger is not that computers will begin to think like men, but that men will begin to think like computers."*
> — Sidney T. Harris

Clearly, there are grand philosophical arguments that can be made as we advocate for assessment on our own terms. There are probing debate questions that challenge and show the conceptual weaknesses behind large-scale assessment systems. We are talking about systems that would replace substance with a false kind of evaluation. In short, they would replace doing with counting.

We list a number of these debate questions below:

- What empirical proof do you have that the assessment system and approach you are proposing will work better for our field than the systems we use now?

- What evidence can you provide that the world of higher education or our discipline is structured, operates or is organized conceptually in ways that makes your proposed approach more effective than ours?

- How can you prove to us that putting results in a form that you define as measurable will lead to improvement in student learning, or to advancement and innovation in our field?

- What proof is there that all quality in every dimension of life can be engineered through the application of large-scale assessment systems, or that the larger and more centralized the assessment system, the higher the quality will become?

- How is it possible to call for a deeply integrated system of standardization so that results can be compared, and at the same time call for innovation or a climate of innovation.

- Do you believe that students carry a great deal of responsibility for what they learn?

- Isn't a model always a diminished version of the original?

- Can you prove that if we fashion a program that specifically works for us, we will fall behind?

- Can you prove that any numbers we collect about specific performance indicators can predict for anyone the level of quality of education an individual student will receive, or the success of that person after graduation?

Unfortunately, in practical terms, we art and design administrators and faculty seldom have the opportunity to ask such questions, especially of the proponents of large, centralized systems. We do not have direct contact with the Department of Education, nor do we have much opportunity to develop the overall policy of our own institutions on such matters. Instead, it is often the senior administrators at our colleges and universities who have closer contact with those proposing policy objectives that may challenge our way of doing things. Therefore, you should ask yourself, "What are the philosophical and programmatic situations of senior administrators at my institution?" We are asked to respond to our deans, vice chancellors and provosts who oversee regional accreditation issues, usually while the accreditation review is in progress. And here, we are referring to regional accreditation, not discipline-based accreditation. In such regional cases, we may be asked to demonstrate to these administrators or to university committees how we are meeting these new assessment requirements. It may be that our task, we are told, is not to question the assessment, but rather to show how we are in compliance. And often our own institutional administrators and committees, for their part, choose not to get involved in the grand philosophical arguments. Rather, they are seeking merely to get through another cycle of accreditation with the least possible disruption.

Although this position may change as requirements increase and patience wears thin, these are often the current facts of our daily existence. Engaging in philosophical dialogue is usually a luxury not granted to us. As art and design professionals and as individuals we can make our broader arguments through letters to elected representatives and to agencies, but within our own institutions there is often little appetite for the discourse that is so needed on these critical issues. However, if you have the chance for such discourse, it is important to be prepared.

When we cannot debate, what can we do?

First, we can demonstrate more effectively the means of assessment we already have, and explain with greater clarity why these means work well for the visual arts. For example, we have already mentioned that we have regularly-scheduled juries, where individuals display their works of art and design for and are graded by teachers other than their own. We have competitions, many of them public. We have public exhibitions followed by public and peer critique. We have exams in courses, and skills that must be mastered. And there is, of course, the constant feedback and criticism that goes with being an artist or designer, whether in creation of works, scholarship, or education.

All these means of assessment are already there, and they are healthy precisely because they are informed and disinterested. That is an ideal combination—the intelligence of informed critique combined with the absence of self-interest on the part of the reviewer. Those who advocate for massive, large-scale assessment seek the absence of self-interest, but they neglect the more essential qualities of informed criticism and individual judgment.

In addition to demonstrating the many means of assessment that have served the arts so well, we can demonstrate convincingly that an evaluation's purpose is improvement, not merely measuring or monitoring. This is a very important distinction. The most meaningful improvement comes from within a discipline, not from outside it, precisely because criticism is substantively informed. It seeks not to measure, but to make better.

How will standardized tests and criteria improve on already existing informed means of assessment? How *could* they? So, let us never accept the argument that we are not interested in or engaged sufficiently in evaluation. Rather, we should demonstrate what we already have in place and why it works. Let us go back to the lists of approaches mentioned earlier and learn to describe and advocate them more efficiently than we are already doing at present. At the very least, this will go far toward showing that we are serious about what we do, and that, far from avoiding judgment and criticism, we invite them, and already incorporate many forms of honest assessment in our educational activities and daily lives.

Also, don't accept the argument that experts in professions are not sufficiently removed from their content and their interest in it to conduct objective evaluations. Don't accept the argument that professionals have a built-in conflict of interest. We must not agree that lack of specific disciplinary or professional qualifications becomes a qualification for being an assessor. We can point out that experts are internally driven. They are far more concerned about quality and far more sophisticated in their understanding about quality in their field than anyone else possibly could be. If appropriate to the situation, we can also point out that the conflict of interest argument is usually made to seek redistributions of assessment powers, not to promote quality.

Conclusion

*"We have sunk to a depth where
restatement of the obvious is the first duty of
intelligent men."*
— George Orwell

At the beginning of this paper, we started by trying to articulate what it is that we as visual artists think about and do. We did this, in part, because we all take such activities for granted—to the point that we ourselves may be unaware of how much we incorporate artistic decision-making and criticism into our daily lives. What is obvious to us is not obvious to others.

We hope it has been helpful to review these activities, and point out the constant assessment in which we already engage. Only then, in full awareness, can we convincingly demonstrate the vitality of our professional evaluation approaches. We must make what is obvious to us more obvious to others.

We close with a number of brief points. As we said at the beginning, the need to consider ways and means of keeping assessment on our own terms is a particular contextual problem that we face now. We are not alone in this. At the beginning of this national debate, art and design and other disciplines were being challenged by the tenets and arguments of the outcomes ideologists. Some institutions and some regional and specialized accrediting agencies bought into this ideology to the point that they were willing to accept some of its procedures. But now two things are increasingly clear at the national level. First, the outcomes ideologues have turned on the institutions and accreditors who bought in, and have continued to criticize the institutions; and the disciplines and professions. Second, and more encouragingly, there are several kinds of higher education reactions to this move, including counter-moves by the U.S. Senate, for example. It will be interesting to see what happens in higher education as a whole if the drive for centralization of assessment powers continues. Five years from now we may not be talking about this problem, or we may be talking about more advanced manifestations of it.

We in art and design, however, will still be evaluating, but on our terms, at least internally.

What we have tried to do is to provide a number of ways of looking at the problem we face, formulating ideas and conditions central to assessment on our own terms, and suggesting ways of advocating and defending the validity of our assessment approaches in a fundamental sense. We understand, of course, that we can always learn from our opponents, even if our opponents are reluctant to learn from us. We hope this paper has been helpful for you in terms of describing how you might proceed at your institution and in the professional realms you inhabit. It is helpful for us all as we think about the nature of this problem to consider how we can best address it locally in ways that maintain the integrity of our field.

> *"Always do what is right. This will*
> *gratify some people and astonish the rest."*
> — Mark Twain